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CHARACTER IS NOT TRANSFERABLE

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Rinaldi¹ shows to the eye what Christ tells to the ear by the story of the wise and foolish virgins. Jesus, in his dramatic story of an eastern wedding, with its sudden midnight cry, its sense of surprise, its shut door of opportunity, pointed out the necessity of preparing for all moral crises. It is the moment of such a crisis that Rinaldi has represented in his statue "The moment, one and infinite." Browning calls it the tick of one's lifetime.

Such moments are big with consequences. Failure to measure up to emergencies shuts doors that sometimes cannot be opened again. The power of critical moments to settle destinies has been a favorite theme with the moralist and the student of human life. When Julius Cæsar, the proconsul of Gaul, crossed the little river Rubicon, which was forbidden him by law, his eye was fixed on Rome, and he was too used to victory to be careful of consequences. As men have read of this turning-point of his history, they have put words upon his lips: "The enemy awaits me; the opportunity invites; the die is cast." Men have attributed these words to him because they felt how his own and his country's destiny hung upon that one event. Lord Tennyson rightly grasped the point of Christ's story of the virgins when he applied it to Queen Guinevere, in her effort to reopen a shut door:

"Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?

Oh, let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!"

"No, no, too late, ye cannot enter now!"

Some things are done in critical hours that cannot be undone, and left undone that cannot be done. This is a tragic fact of life.

What is not so apparent is why it should be so; why a man's future and his happiness should be decided by the action of a single critical hour. It does not seem just. A well-known New England

¹ See frontispiece.

essayist, as he looked at Rinaldi's beautiful group in marble, and noticed the pathetic entreaty of the foolish virgin and the uplifted hand, as if to guard her treasure, and the look of deep sadness as the wise virgin refuses her sister's request, expressed a not uncommon feeling on the part of many when they read Christ's story. He said: "She should have given her the oil." The essayist would not have made this remark had he not failed to see that in both the story and the statue the subject is character, and that character is not transferable. You may give a man money or material aid in his hour of need, although whether you ought to do so is often doubtful; but to give him character is not possible, however much you may desire to do so, or however much you sympathize with his distress, as the essayist sympathized with the foolish virgin. Sympathy cannot change the facts of life, but only our feeling toward them. Character is a personal achievement, and it cannot be acquired in a moment. The critical hour may seem harsh in its dealing with men, but is never unjust. It never makes nor unmakes any man; it is simply an hour of revelation, revealing what the man has been making himself during his previous years. Wellington understood this when he said that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the cricket-field at Eton. It is an inescapable spiritual law that the unworthy are by their own act excluded from the highest achievements when life's greatest moments come. Herein consisted the foolish virgin's folly. "Man's whole life and training is just to fit him to do the right thing at the critical moment. He who fails at this juncture fails not because he, by mere accident, took the wrong path or made a bad guess, or lost his stake; he fails because he has not so ordered his previous life that he might instinctively do the right thing at a push." The real critical hour is therefore not the hour of the emergency, but the unobserved preceding hours; for they silently and imperceptibly build up the character, which the emergency will sooner or later reveal and show whether it has grown strong or weak. What Christ's story so forcibly teaches, and Rinaldi's touching rendering of it illustrates, is the truth that character, being a personal achievement, is not transferable, and that, if a critical hour discovers to a man that he has an "ungirt loin and an unlit lamp," it is only revealing the results of his previous life and conduct.